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# The Power of Virtual Space

Katherine G. Schmidt Ph.D.  
Molloy College, [kschmidt@molloy.edu](mailto:kschmidt@molloy.edu)

Derek C. Hatch

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## The Power of Virtual Space

*Derek C. Hatch and Katherine G. Schmidt*

The following essay emerges from the consultation of Evangelical Catholics and Catholic Evangelicals at the 2016 convention of the College Theology Society, which brings together Catholic and Protestant voices concerning a shared topic. In 2016, the theme of liturgy and contemporary social and communications media was in focus. As panelists, we offered complementary papers that have become two sections of this essay. In the first section, Katherine Schmidt provides a theological account of media from a Catholic perspective. Through reflections on the mediatory character of the incarnation, she argues that para-liturgical or extra-liturgical spaces are integral to the Eucharistic assembly and that the internet is at once challenging and cultivating such spaces. In the second section, Derek Hatch provides an historical account of the broader Christian engagement with media, presented through his experience as a Baptist. He argues that, while earlier technological approaches reinforced confessional boundaries, the internet provides new spaces for fruitful ecumenical relationships. Together, we claim that contemporary experience with social media technologies offers a particular cultural and ecclesial moment for engaging with theological difference both within and without our respective traditions and for cultivating renewed vision of the fullness of the church catholic.

### Theological Account of Media from a Catholic Perspective *Katherine G. Schmidt*

The Christian tradition has a vested interest in technological culture not only because the church is in the world and cannot

be otherwise, but also because questions about technology invite questions about mediation. And religion is about mediation. Birgit Meyer reminds us that, "After all, the relation between religion and media is neither as new nor as weird as was suggested by the initial excited attention devoted to electronic mass media such as television and film. Upon deeper reflection, media were found to be intrinsic to religion."<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, I would like to argue two related points. First, I advance the idea that Christian liturgy can be understood as virtual. This is an expansion and concretization of the idea of religion as mediation. Second, I would like to propose that the virtual nature of Christian liturgy—and indeed, the virtual nature of the church itself—turns toward a self-reflective theological analysis of the internet. I propose under this second point that the internet has changed what it means to be social to such a degree that we must now understand its social spaces as ancillary to the liturgical spaces of the tradition.

The following reflection on the relationship of technology and liturgy has an important starting point: what I have to say will only apply to Christian traditions that understand what happens in their sanctuaries and on their altars to be indispensable. That is, the following arguments have no foothold in traditions that understand going to church as optional for the Christian life. What follows is contingent upon the theological import of "being there," be it for mass or sermon, rite or reading. We might debate the finer points of what constitutes liturgy elsewhere, but I will take people at their word, meaning that if they are calling it liturgy, that is what I mean by liturgy here.

I propose we understand the liturgy as "virtual." Virtuality seems like a shiny new thing, as that which belongs properly to a world dominated by computer-mediation. "Virtual" is a word used by the young, the affluent, and the otherwise technologically adept. It might even be one of those words that marks identity; perhaps the world can already be divided into those who use it—who know it intimately and know the world by it—and those who don't. If this is true at all, then "virtual" is a very important word. We should be clear about what it means. It does not mean (only) the new and the shiny. In fact, I contend that virtuality as a mode of cultural production and participation is very, very old. I submit virtuality is a possible hermeneutic for the sacramentality of the

church. A broader and more inclusive definition of "virtual" allows us to read different moments of Christian history as performances of mediation that are, essentially, virtual. This understanding of virtual refers not simply to digital contexts but to a much broader dialectic at the heart of mediation.

Because of the incarnational foundation of the Christian tradition, mediation is a central aspect of the church. This becomes more apparent as one wades into sacramental theology, as well as into exploring the role of scripture in the church. Indeed, it may be the case that debates about the sacraments have very similar battle lines, tone, and theological stakes as debates over scripture. But at the heart of both Word and Sacrament is the radical idea that we can experience God in the gift of mediation. The economy of salvation and the sacramental economy speak to the deepest aspects of what it means to be human on precisely this point.

Media scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin unwittingly touch upon theological anthropology in their exploration of mediation.<sup>2</sup> They argue that the proliferation of modern media reflects a desire for immediacy. Somewhat ironically, a desire for immediacy actually engenders a logic of 'hypermediacy.' They argue that the desire for immediacy motivates and inspires all kinds of media: "In every manifestation, hypermediacy makes us aware of the medium or media and (in sometimes subtle and sometimes obvious ways) reminds us of our desire for immediacy."<sup>3</sup>

Bolter and Grusin argue that this desire is about as old as the Renaissance. While I appreciate Bolter and Grusin's historical sensitivities, I maintain that the desire for immediacy is not an effect of the modern view of nature but is in fact a constitutive part of what it means to be human. This claim is theological. For Christians, the desire for immediacy is the longing for communion with God, the source of all truth and reality itself. In fact, the very dialectic of immediacy and hypermediacy is essential to the Christian imagination: the longing for communion with God and with one another drives us into mediating structures that reflect the desire for immediacy while simultaneously bespeaking the inevitability of (hyper)mediation. When God takes flesh in Jesus Christ, God becomes at once immediate and hypermediate to the human condition. That is, Jesus takes human nature fully while at the same time transforming what it means to be human. This affects the Christian perspective of all materiality and informs the

hypermediating practices of the as yet-insatiable human desire for immediacy with our Creator.

The dialectic between immediacy and hypermediacy is not frictionless. We feel it acutely in moments of miscommunication, dropped connections, and imperfect mediations. But it is precisely this friction that constitutes mediation and therefore constitutes religious ritual. We can describe this friction between the desire for immediacy and its hypermediating productivity as an essentially virtual experience.

By describing the sacramental life of the church as virtual I mean to highlight the various ways in which the church lives in the productive space between immediacy and hypermediacy. More precisely, I want to highlight the dialectic of presence and absence upon which these logics rely, a dialectic without which the Church and its liturgy cannot function. Virtuality is the making present of something that is absent. Mediated presence, however, is predicated upon and constantly referring back to absence. Theologically speaking, this tension between presence and absence is just how we have to understand God in the world after the Ascension. As Michel de Certeau describes it, the Church is a protracted experience of Mary Magdalene's question, "Where have you put him?"<sup>4</sup> We are a people with and without a Body. The tension between presence and absence, then, is the creative space in which God invites the church into the mystery of the God-man.

The Christological councils, ancient in their logic and definitive in their teaching, continue to remind us of our own collapsing tendencies with regard to the mystery of the incarnation. The doctrine draws us into the tension between presence and absence (as well as between humanity and divinity) but we are always reaching to resolve it. Sometimes, we are tempted to emphasize Christ in his divinity, carving a space for the divine in a world that no longer has eyes to see it. Other times, we are tempted to emphasize Jesus in his humanity, joining our sufferings and our other distinctly human experiences to his. The teachings of the councils function as the boundary lines for such Christological reflection. This allows us to see the tension between humanity and divinity, between God being present to us and utterly absent and ineffable, as a space of our salvation. This tension functions as a kind of necessary logic for understanding both God and the world.

It is within these doctrinal boundaries that the liturgical game

is played. Here I will draw upon the work of sacramental theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet, who builds his sacramental system upon the idea of "symbolic exchange." Chauvet wants to assert the gratuitousness of grace and rescue it from the instrumental causality that has dominated sacramental theology. He does so by means of a contrast between two logics: "that of the marketplace and value, based on objects in themselves, and that of symbolic exchange, before or beyond the realm of worth and based on the relations between subjects as such."<sup>5</sup> According to Chauvet, a symbol is that which "introduces us into a realm to which it itself belongs."<sup>6</sup> It "brings with itself the entire socio-cultural system to which it belongs."<sup>7</sup> A symbol is fundamentally about the relationship between subjects for Chauvet, for it is meant to "join the persons who produce or receive it with their cultural world (social, religious, economic...) and so to identify them as subjects in their relations with other subjects." Symbols are not mere representations of another reality; they are a "function of summons or challenge, of coming-to-presence...of communication between subjects."<sup>8</sup> Contrasted with the logic of market exchange, "the symbol is by its nature outside *the realm of value*. What is important is not the utility of the object, but the exchange that it permits between the subjects."<sup>9</sup>

I want to recapitulate Chauvet's sacramental theology using Genesis 2-3. The Garden reminds us that we possess an objectifying tendency that often eclipses communion with God and each other. Reaching for the fruit is reaching for divinity as an object to be possessed, made in our own image and responding to our demands. The temptation is to dominate by objectification, to respond to our desire for immediacy with divinity by taking it for ourselves and making ourselves little gods. In short, it is to act without regard for our identity as creatures and God's identity as Creator. In tragic irony, our objectifying tendency born out of the desire for immediacy results in a mediated relationship with God, as our expulsion from the Garden means an expulsion from God's unmediated presence.

But in the beauty of God's redemptive creativity, mediation is not just a mark of our sin; it is also the means for our salvation. The sacraments are a symbolic system of actions, words, and objects that evoke both presence and absence. Inasmuch as the sacraments are meant to bring us into the presence of God, they

are also meant to remind us of God's absence. Their corporality bespeaks the grace of God in Christ, who takes flesh to redeem us. And their corporality bespeaks God's absence from us by pointing us back to the mediation that marks our humanity and our distance from God after the Garden and this side of the eschaton. It is precisely here that the sacraments reveal themselves as virtual: They are suspended in the uncomfortable and productive tension between presence and absence. To live incarnationally is to live suspended between these two without collapsing one into the other. To emphasize presence over absence is to covet a closure of the distance between creature and Creator; to emphasize absence over presence is to doubt the apostolic witness that God dwelt among us in a real way.

So what does understanding the sacramental economy and its liturgical instantiation as virtual do for the church? Bringing the virtual into a theological mode can begin to expose biases and fears about technological culture that can be harmful to the church's relationship to the historical moment in which it exists. By acknowledging the centrality—and indeed, the theological necessity—of mediation in the church, we are better equipped to evaluate the media ecology in which we live and work. We can acknowledge the anthropological truths at the heart of cultural particularities and trends. Moreover, we can have theologically rigorous conversations about the place of the church in technological culture that neither reduce the church to a pastoral ideal nor oversimplify the culture into an amalgam of corrosive forces.

This rigor is especially important given the sociological challenges currently facing the American church. Christian traditions in the United States are facing the problem of dramatic disaffiliation, sometimes referred to as the rise of the "nones."<sup>10</sup> This is a multifaceted phenomenon for which it would be foolish to propose root causes. Taking the moment for what it is, however, my analysis of this moment is that we live, regardless of geographic location, in a suburbanized economic culture, wherein traditional centers of social life have become simply one aspect among many from which we choose as we construct personal identity. This means that religion, too, is suburbanized, insofar as religious communities no longer function as the center of communities of all kinds, and therefore no longer function as the center of social life.

Given this sociological landscape, understanding the virtual as

a theological category can open creative ways to re-engage social life. I propose that we diagnose our current social moment in the church by asking after the theological relationship between the altar or sanctuary and the vestibule or fellowship hall. The latter are liminal ecclesial spaces that can function as strong symbols of the church/world relationship. They are threshold spaces that function extra-liturgically but are still liturgically referential. These are the spaces of sodalities, Bible studies, prayer groups, schools, homeschool co-ops, labor unions, and bowling leagues. American Christian communities have at certain points in their history enjoyed a great variety and robustness of these spaces, extending well beyond the vestibule or hall and into neighborhoods, towns, regions, and cities. To the degree that American religious communities are suburbanized, they can no longer rely on the traditional ancillary social spaces to form the complex network that reinforces; sometimes daily, the church as the center of one's social life. Rendered a choice among many in the logic of market exchange, the church is thrust now into a system with a voluntaristic logic that is alien to the pedagogy of symbolic exchange.

From a Catholic perspective, the sacramental efficacy of the Eucharistic assembly is not affected by these spaces. This is the heart of *ex opere operato*. But this does not exclude a theological relationship between these ancillary social spaces and the sacramental life of the church. The spaces are "ancillary" because they are supportive of the Eucharistic assembly insofar as they are the very spaces that make up the cultural frame of reference for the sacramental rite. They are "social" insofar as they are spaces wherein the members of the Body of Christ have the opportunity to practice the symbolic exchange learned in the powerful pedagogy of the Eucharist. Put more simply, these ancillary social spaces are the spaces of potential acts of Christian charity between the members of the Body. These are the sites for potential communion, a sort of connective tissue between each Eucharist. Therefore, while their successes and failures do not affect the sacrament as such, they do represent an important feature of the viability of the Body of Christ as a eucharistic people.

The dense networks of social communication that sustained a robust liminal space symbolized by the vestibule or hall have become weak, nonexistent, or replaced by new means of connection in this technological paradigm. But we cannot simply name



this crisis and double down on doctrine, tempting though it may be. What is before us, I believe, is a moment of great opportunity, wherein the church should pay careful attention to the ancillary social spaces being created and maintained by and among the members of the Body through technology. This does not necessarily mean that we all begin live-tweeting Sunday services. But it may mean that pastors and leaders stop joking about Twitter and start asking the young people who remain in their communities about the role that platforms like Twitter play in their social lives. It means that the church make concerted efforts to produce technologically literate leaders who are open to understanding the ways in which the internet has changed and continues to change what it means to be social. It is a time of possibility, wherein the catholicity of the church can be brought to the fore as consonant with a cultural paradigm of virtuality.

I want to provide two examples of technological changes regarding these ancillary spaces, the first of which is closer to the liturgical life of the church than the second. Both examples demonstrate the importance of ancillary social spaces, as well as the way those spaces have already come to rely upon technology for their initiation and cultivation.

A few years ago, I was part of a group of women who sustained our parish's eucharistic adoration ministry. We each took an hour or two a week to make sure that the Blessed Sacrament was not left alone in a side chapel. While it is not a Mass, adoration ministry is a liturgical act that represents an ancillary space for further eucharistic pedagogy and for potential communion between members of the Body of Christ. This is a commonplace ministry for Catholic parishes the world over and one sustained by many people before me, including my grandmothers. One curious feature of my experience of this ministry, however, is that I only knew what two of the women in the group looked like: the one who had the hour before me and the one who had the hour after me. I knew everyone's name and I'm sure I was at Mass with many of them. I also knew everyone's email address. The entire ministry was sustained over email, which is not altogether unique for many communities today. One reading of this experience is that the network functioned as the newest tool for the logistical realities of parish life. In light of the idea of the church as virtual, however, this email chain becomes another moment of the

church's sacramental life that relies on the dialectic of presence and absence. In a sense, the space created by this email list was a microcosm of the church itself: its theological center was the Eucharist, and its members are both present and absent to one another over space and time.

A second anecdote of these ancillary social spaces is less directly liturgical. I recently found myself at the first meeting of a new chapter of Young Catholic Professionals. Young people from all over the diocese had gathered at a local bar to pray, have a drink, network, and plan. Here before me stood the children of suburban Catholicism, isolated in this parish or that, reaching through cyberspace for community. Indeed, the impetus for the entire ministry is to connect young Catholics to older Catholic professionals in order to help them sustain their Catholic identity in non-Catholic work settings. On the one hand, Young Catholic Professionals is the new generation of the ancillary Catholic social spaces of old. On the other, it is inflected with a technological and organizational logic that reflects a tacit response to the erosion of these spaces in a paradigm of fracture, anxiety, and the longing for extra-liturgical communal practices.

We may long for a time in the church when it was simple—when iPhones didn't ring during the consecration and people talked face to face to plan liturgies. But the Incarnation is about mediation—the person Jesus Christ, the church he founded, and the Word inspired by the Spirit to bring us into contact with the living God. As we struggle with media and technology, we may come to realize that our struggle is simply another form of lament over life outside of the Garden. The church is already well-versed in the world of mediation, and the opportunity before us is to bring our rich and ancient traditions of mediation to bear on the mediated world in which the church now lives.

The media ecology within which the church must find a way to thrive often forces Christians to come face to face with the brokenness of the *ekklesia*. Members of various Christian communities and traditions continually run into one another online, often with vitriolic consequences. In what follows, however, we attempt to present the other side of this new experience of old divisions, asking whether online space—as another sort of extra-liturgical social space—can actually function as a paradigm for ecumenical dialogue and even friendship.

## Broader Christian Engagement with Media

*Derek C. Hatch*

While it is worth stating that technology has been with the church from the beginning (consider that even the production of the material elements of the Eucharist requires some form of making), the focus of this consultation is on something more peculiar. It is not hard to find an opinion about technology in the church, whether focused on questions of projector screens (or even flat panel televisions) within the sanctuary (a question that has been going on in evangelical churches for at least the past two decades), the use of online methods for tithing, at least one church's experiment with a holographic projection of the pastor in satellite campuses of his church, not to mention other curiosities even further afield, such as the emergence of churches wholly located online (e.g., Second Life church) and moral deliberations about whether virtual interactions violate physical relationships and commitments. While these questions (and many others) are serious, and some may even be fascinating to examine, I want to focus on the role of technology in ecumenical endeavors. To do so, I will offer a broad overview of the ways in which technology has impacted confessional boundaries in prior historical eras as well as in the more contemporary period (with a particular emphasis on the latter for liturgy). I should state that these observations are very broad and subject to further discussion, nuance, and detail (especially concerning key exceptional cases). Despite the potential overreach of my broader comments, I do think some key differences will come to the fore, differences that might sharpen our understanding of how technology in general (and social communications media in particular) might shape our conception and practice of liturgy as well as the ever-present ecumenical challenges facing the body of Christ today.

As has been discussed by numerous historians, the Protestant Reformation gained traction and perhaps came to fruition because of the invention of the movable type printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the mid-fifteenth century. While this new technology was initially used for scholarly work, it fueled humanist intellectual interests, including those involving the primary languages of the Bible.<sup>11</sup> After all, once he refined the printing process, Gutenberg's

major printed work was completed—a whole edition of the Latin Vulgate around 1455. Several decades later, printing expanded its aim to the wider masses. When the spark of the Reformation was lit in 1517 with Martin Luther's hand-written Ninety-five Theses, it was the printing press that spread that small fire into a blaze. Soon various editions of Protestant texts by Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, and others were scattered across Europe. Moreover, while the first Bible produced by Gutenberg's invention was a Catholic version, it was the Protestants who dominated the reproduction of the biblical text. In 1522, Luther completed a German translation of the New Testament from the original Greek, and by 1534, his entire German Bible was in production. Other vernacular translations were created and printed, serving the Reformation's aim to make Scripture more accessible to the laity. So important is the printing press to the events of the Reformation that historian Philip Schaff described its role as providential.<sup>12</sup>

Several centuries later, the energy provided by the printing press to the reform-minded Protestants had not generated reform, but in fact division. One example of such separation is found in the nineteenth-century American context where Catholic schoolchildren were caught between the publicly available schools and their Protestant shape, emblemized by the use of the King James Bible. In Philadelphia, Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick asked that Catholic schoolchildren in public schools be allowed to recite the Ten Commandments from the authorized Catholic Douay Bible. This request was granted, but the response by anti-Catholic protestors was fierce. Riots broke out, killing several people and injuring many more.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, there was significant damage to property, including several Catholic churches in the city. In Boston in 1859, numerous Catholic children refused to recite the King James version of the Ten Commandments. No riots broke out this time, though it fueled the creation of Catholic parochial schools, in effect further dividing Catholic and Protestant children from one another.<sup>14</sup>

While there were certainly occasions when print books and articles served the uniting impulse of ecumenism, these incidents and others highlight the role of technology in reinforcing divisions within the body of Christ. In short, there were Catholic Bibles and Protestant Bibles, and there were Catholic books and

Protestant books. Within Protestantism, there are even more divisions—Methodist books, Presbyterian books, Baptist books, etc. Someone inhabiting this world was (and occasionally still is) reminded of this state of affairs. Thus, even though accessing intellectual sources from another tradition was possible (and some rare few did such work), it was difficult to do so because the inventory of university libraries and confessional bookstores also operated along these conventional lines. Why would a Baptist bookstore have a Catholic book or Bible? Why would a Catholic school library carry a Lutheran periodical? Moreover, there was a social stigma attached to serious engagement with a neighboring Christian tradition, as though such interest meant a departure from and betrayal of one's present home. With these broad observations in place, we see a steep uphill climb for any efforts at ecumenism.

Turning to the contemporary period, it seems that the internet and its creation of new virtual spaces (as well as new reflections on old virtual spaces) has offered different contributions to the work of ecumenism. Of course, the rise of disaffiliation (mentioned in the first section) and the dissolution of the subcultures that undergirded many traditions are at work in bringing the diversity of Christians into closer proximity. Now Catholics and Baptists have great difficulty speaking solely within their distinct confessional circles. This creates a fertile ground for friendships that transform the most pressing ecumenical questions. As indicated above, indicated, liminal ecclesial spaces (e.g., universities, neighborhoods, labor unions) have become significant for the church/world relationship. Interestingly, they have also become somewhat ecumenical. Insofar as this is the case, liturgical reflections, especially among Protestants, have taken on a more catholic tone and shape. That is, whereas previously confessional boundaries (including their liturgical elements) were reinforced by technology, a different dynamic exists presently, as can be observed in several ways.

First, access to musical resources such as hymnals has certainly increased, but the openness to alternate songs and musical traditions (e.g., Gregorian chant) has been augmented by digital archives and collections.<sup>15</sup> Baptists can borrow Catholic, Lutheran, or Orthodox hymns. Moreover, the space that print books inhabit is different. For instance, I recently purchased an Eastern Orthodox service book for Holy Week and Pascha as well as Dom Gregory

Dix's *The Shape of the Liturgy*, neither of which come from my tradition. Yet not only was the means by which I purchased these books different (a website as opposed to a confessionally affiliated brick-and-mortar store), the purchase carried with it less of the stigma that might have occurred if these texts were purchased in a previous era.

Second, many free-church Protestant traditions have cultivated greater familiarity with the lectionary and the rhythm of the liturgical calendar. Both the Revised Common Lectionary and the Catholic lectionary are openly available in numerous places. Within Baptist life and thought, a great deal of liturgical renewal has come about as a result of preaching according to the lectionary (or at least one of the texts found therein). For free-church Protestants, this new rhythm has prompted an openness to aspects of the calendar that were viewed as off-limits (e.g., Lent). Now, rather than sharp divisions along confessional boundaries (divisions that involve the Bible as well), the shared use of the liturgical calendar brings Christians from different traditions into liturgical proximity (and perhaps even contact) with one another.

Third, numerous liturgical resources are available on the internet. Many of these transcend confessional boundaries. The Taizé community most certainly predates this new context, but the spread and influence of this ecumenical monastic movement has increased as a result of their efforts to share songs and prayers with a community the boundaries of which extend far beyond this small French village. Similarly, other liturgical resources have emerged through crowd-sourcing. One particular blog, which receives and catalogues liturgical elements such as calls to worship, prayers, litanies, and benedictions, is operated by a female Mennonite. Even the Roman Missal—all 1,500 pages of it—can be accessed digitally.

Finally, devotional materials have become more widely available due to social communications media. For instance, the Book of Common Prayer daily office is available on Twitter in several formats. Orthodox icons are visible on Instagram and Pinterest. The presence of these materials on the internet is interesting for several reasons. Not only are they present to people who may not have seen them previously, but they introduce a diachronic element to the virtual space. For example, the use of the daily office on

Twitter issues an invitation to participation – an invite that most certainly has an ecumenical character.

These developments are not exceptional cases; they exist within a deeper trajectory that moves toward something like catholicity. Further, recent treatments of liturgy by evangelicals have not maintained confessional boundaries, but embraced all liturgical resources in hopes of renewing their liturgical shape by engaging all voices within the great tradition.<sup>16</sup> This leads to another question: Are these encounters and their fruits truly ecumenical? To be sure, if they are, then the form of ecumenical engagement seen here is without a doubt more diffuse and hard to track. Unlike more conventional ecumenical approaches (which have sought formal multi-lateral dialogues and high-level meetings), this approach occurs more tacitly, on the parish or congregational level, within worship planning sessions, or in conversations in virtual spaces on social media. On first glance, this might even look like chaos, with the potential to destroy confessional identity (certainly a few Baptists in my part of the world would think so). Yet, the result of this new virtual ecumenism is certainly greater diversity of liturgical practice, but also liturgical encounters that fuel an embrace of the wider catholicity of the church.

In many ways, it seems that this sort of engagement resonates with the ecumenical dialogue discussed in the 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*. There, John Paul II speaks of dialogue as more than an exchange of ideas, but rather “an exchange of gifts.”<sup>17</sup> The ways in which liturgical resources and rhythms have been shared by these new media open up lines of communication that were not previously present or acknowledged. The role of liturgy in ecumenical dialogue was also highlighted. John Paul II stated that liturgical renewal had occurred in the Catholic Church as well as in “certain other Ecclesial Communities.” He noted that more frequent Eucharistic celebration and relative synchronization of liturgical readings (i.e., through the lectionaries) are the fruit of this ecumenical effort.<sup>18</sup>

Contemporary ecumenical conversations have focused on what Catholic theologian Paul Murray has called “receptive ecumenism.” This strategy shifts the focus from teaching other traditions about one’s own ecclesial home. Instead, as was described in an international conference in 2006 on the subject, what is pursued



is "a mutual process in which each offers its own gifts as well as receiving from those of others" in which "the primary emphasis is upon learning rather than teaching."<sup>19</sup> This stance, then, does not look for the uncrossable boundaries between traditions, but the gifts that open up space for new life together. Without a doubt, liturgy (and its shape within various ecclesial communities) is one of those gifts. As Peter Leithart states, even though receptive ecumenism is not a smooth path, when pursued, "Christians fall in love with the presence of God in the people, practices, and structures of other Christian traditions."<sup>20</sup>

Insofar as the various forms of social communications media have aided Christians of diverse traditions to not only see their brothers and sisters as such, but also to produce a genuine openness to their liturgical practices, steps toward receptive ecumenism have taken place. As we have noted, for free-church Protestants, something like a liturgical renewal movement has occurred. Yet more than liturgical shape is transformed. In the spirit of the ancient church axiom *lex orandi, lex credendi*, as new liturgical practices give rise to better theological reflections, new horizons are recognized. In other words, a growing Baptist embrace of the rhythm of the liturgical year can prompt reflections on salvation as participation in the pilgrim church on its sojourn toward union with God or the role of saints in deepening this regular pattern. As a result, ecumenical possibilities will emerge as well, and each of these in small yet significant ways will contribute to the realization of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

The two parts of this essay highlight the role of extra-ecclesial encounters within liminal spaces (e.g., fellowship halls and blogosphere) in deepening the ties that bind together the Body of Christ. These spaces, previously overlooked or relativized, now play a significant part in maintaining and passing on the faith. These spaces (digital or otherwise) are virtual, meaning that they oscillate between presence and absence, both concerning Christ himself and the eschatological *ekklesia*. As such, further reflection is needed in order to fully discover how these extra-liturgical spaces fruitfully support the liturgical life of the church.

This consultation yielded some new directions for future collaboration. The most promising of these is investigating how the confessional differences between Christian traditions affect their distinct approaches to technology. While more consideration is



certainly needed along these lines, both of us suspect that the more open approach that Free Church traditions have toward technology in their liturgies owes in large part to the nature of their sacramental theologies and congregational-based ecclesiologies. This only furthers the claims made in this essay that the sacramental life of the church is not merely subject to technological culture, but is instead intimately interwoven with the technological paradigm. It is our hope that future scholarship in subjects such as ecumenism, sacramentalism, and ecclesiology attends to these dynamics.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Birgit Meyer, "Media and the Senses in the Making of Religious Experience: An Introduction," *Material Religion* 4, no. 2 (July 2008): 127.

<sup>2</sup>Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>4</sup>See Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 81.

<sup>5</sup>Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan, S.J. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 111.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 113, quoting E. Ortigues, *Le discours et le symbole* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1962), 65.

<sup>7</sup>Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 115.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>10</sup>Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," <http://www.pewforum.org>.

<sup>11</sup>See Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), 366-67.

<sup>12</sup>Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 6 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888), 560.

<sup>13</sup>John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 40; Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 405.

<sup>14</sup>McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, 7-11, 41-42. Similar tensions occurred in Cincinnati in 1869-1870 (*ibid.*, 115).

<sup>15</sup>It is worth noting that some hymnals have displayed some level of ecumenicity since, for example, Baptist hymnals have included hymns from the Wesleyan movement (such as those by Charles Wesley).

<sup>16</sup>See the works of Robert Webber and the essays in Kennedy and Hatch, eds., *Gathering Together: Baptists at Work in Worship* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013).

<sup>17</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* §28. It is worth pointing out that Chauvet

uses the mechanics of gift giving to depict his model of symbolic exchange (cf. *Symbol and Sacrament*, 102-9).

<sup>18</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* §45.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Walter Kasper, foreword to *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. Paul D. Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), vii.

<sup>20</sup>Peter Leithart, "Receptive Ecumenism," *First Things*, online, <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/02/receptive-ecumenism>.